

The Court Building

"The Republic endures and this is the symbol of its faith." These words, spoken by Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes in laying the cornerstone for the Supreme Court Building on October 13, 1932, express the importance of the Supreme Court in the American system.

Yet surprisingly, despite its role as a coequal branch of government, the Supreme Court was not provided with a building of its own until 1935, the 146th year of its existence.

Initially, the Court met in the Merchants Exchange Building in New York City. When the National Capital moved to Philadelphia in 1790, the Court moved with it, establishing Chambers first in Independence Hall and later in the City Hall.

When the Federal Government moved, in 1800, to the permanent Capital, Washington, the District of Columbia, the Court again moved with it. Since no provision had been made for a Supreme Court Building, Congress lent the Court space in the new Capitol Building. The Court was to change its meeting place a half dozen times within the Capitol. Additionally, the Court convened for a short period in a private house after the British set fire to the Capitol during the War of 1812. Following this episode, the Court returned to the Capitol and met from 1819 to 1860 in a chamber now restored as the "Old Supreme Court Chamber." Then from 1860 until 1935, the Court sat in what is now known as the "Old Senate Chamber."

Finally in 1929, Chief Justice William Howard Taft, who had been President of the United States from 1909 to 1913, persuaded Congress to end this arrangement and authorize the construction of a permanent home for the Court. Architect Cass Gilbert was charged by Chief Justice Taft to design "a building of dignity and importance suitable for its use as the permanent home of the Supreme Court of the United States."

Neither Taft nor Gilbert survived to see the Supreme Court Building completed. Construction proceeded under the direction of Chief Justice Hughes and architects Cass Gilbert, Jr., and John R. Rockart. The construction, begun in 1932, was completed in 1935, when the Court was finally able to occupy its own building.

The classical Corinthian architectural style was selected because it best harmonized with nearby congressional buildings. The building was designed on a scale in keeping with the importance and dignity of the Court and the Judiciary as a coequal, independent branch of the United States Government, and as a symbol of "the national ideal of justice in the highest sphere of activity."

The general dimensions of the foundation are 385 feet from east to west, (front to back) and 304 feet from north to south. At its greatest height, the building rises four stories above the terrace or ground floor. Marble was chosen as the principal material to be used and \$3 million worth was gathered from foreign and domestic quarries. Vermont marble was used for the exterior, while the four inner courtyards are of crystalline flaked, white Georgia marble. Above the basement level, the walls and floors of all corridors and entrance halls are either wholly or partially of creamy Alabama marble. The wood in offices throughout the building, such as doors, trim, paneled walls, and some floors, is American quartered white oak.

The Court Building cost less than the \$9,740,000 Congress authorized for its construction. Not only was the final and complete cost of the building within the appropriation, but all furnishings were also procured, even though planners had initially expected that the project would require additional appropriations. Upon completion of the project, \$94,000 was returned to the Treasury.

[The foregoing was taken from a booklet prepared by the Supreme Court of the United States, and published with funding from the Supreme Court Historical Society.]

Touring the Building

The main entrance to the [Supreme Court Building](#) is on the west side, facing the United States Capitol. A few low steps lead up to the 100-foot-wide oval plaza in front of the building. Flanking these steps is a pair of marble candelabra with carved panels on their square bases depicting: *Justice*, holding sword and scales, and *The Three Fates*, weaving the thread of life. On either side of the plaza are fountains, flagpoles, and benches.

The bronze flagpole bases are crested with symbolic designs of the scales and sword, the book, the mask and torch, the pen and mace, and the four elements: air, earth, fire, and water.

On either side of the main steps are seated marble figures. These large statues are the work of sculptor James Earle Fraser. On the left is a female figure, the *Contemplation of Justice*. On the right is a male figure, the *Guardian or Authority of Law*.

Sixteen marble columns at the main west entrance support the pediment. On the architrave above is incised "Equal Justice Under Law." Capping the entrance is a sculptured group by Robert Aitken, representing *Liberty Enthroned* guarded by *Order and Authority*. On either side are groups of three figures depicting *Council* and *Research* which Aitken modelled after several prominent individuals concerned with the law or the creation of the Supreme Court Building. At the left are Chief Justice Taft as a youth, Secretary of State Elihu Root, and the architect Cass Gilbert. Seated on the right are Chief Justice Hughes, the sculptor Aitken, and Chief Justice Marshall as a young man.

Too often, visitors do not see the corresponding pediment and columns on the east side. Here the sculpture group is by Hermon A. MacNeil, and the marble figures represent great lawgivers, *Moses*, *Confucius*, and *Solon*, flanked by symbolic groups representing *Means of Enforcing the Law*, *Tempering Justice with Mercy*, *Settlement of Disputes Between States*, and *Maritime* and Other Functions of the Supreme Court. The architrave bears the legend: "Justice the Guardian of Liberty."

One can enter the building through the opened bronze doors of the west front, each of which weighs six and one-half tons and slides into a wall recess when open. The door panels, sculpted by John Donnelly, Jr., depict historic scenes in the development of law: the trial scene from the shield of Achilles, as described in the *Iliad*; a Roman praetor publishing an edict; Julian and a pupil; Justinian publishing the *Corpus Juris*; King John sealing the Magna Carta; the Chancellor publishing the first Statute of Westminster; Lord Coke barring King James from sitting as a Judge; and Chief Justice Marshall and Justice Story.

The main corridor is known as the Great Hall. At each side, double rows of monolithic marble columns rise to a coffered ceiling. Busts of all former Chief Justices are set alternately in niches and on marble pedestals along the side walls. The frieze is decorated with medallion profiles of lawgivers and heraldic devices.

At the east end of the Great Hall, oak doors open into the Court Chamber. This dignified room measures 82 by 91 feet and has a 44-foot ceiling. Its 24 columns are Old Convent Quarry Siena marble from Liguria, Italy; its walls and friezes are of Ivory Vein marble from Alicante, Spain; and its floor borders are Italian and African marble.

The raised Bench behind which the Justices sit during sessions, and other furniture in the Courtroom are mahogany. The Bench was altered in 1972 from a straight-line to a "winged" shape to provide sight and sound advantages over the original design.

At the left of the Bench is the Clerk of the Court's desk. The Clerk is responsible for the administration of the Court's dockets and argument calendars, the supervision of the admission of attorneys to the Supreme Court Bar, and other related activities. To the right is the desk of the Marshal of the Court. The Marshal is the timekeeper of Court sessions, signalling the lawyer by white and red lights as to time limits. The Marshal's responsibilities include the maintenance and security of the building and serving as the Court's building manager.

The attorneys arguing cases before the Court occupy the tables in front of the Bench. When it is their turn to argue, they address the Bench from the lectern in the center. A bronze railing divides the public section from that reserved for the Supreme Court Bar.

Representatives of the press are seated in the red benches along the left side of the Courtroom. The red benches on the right are reserved for guests of the Justices. The black chairs in front of those benches are for the officers of the Court and visiting dignitaries.

Overhead, along all four sides of the Chamber, are sculpted marble panels, the work of Adolph A. Weinman.

- Directly above the Bench are two central figures, depicting *The Majesty of the Law* and *The Power of Government*. Flanking the group on either side are the genii of wisdom and statecraft (*justice*). The figures to the far left represent the *Defense of Human Rights* and *Protection of Innocence*. The figures to the far right represent the *Safeguard of the Liberties* and the *Rights of the People in their Pursuit of Happiness*. ”

- To the right (South Wall) is a procession of historic lawgivers including: *Menes, Hammurabi, Moses, Solomon, Lycurgus, Solon, Draco, Confucius, and Octavian (Augustus)*. Figures symbolizing *Fame* (on the left) and *History* flank them (on the right).

- To the left (North Wall) are historical lawgivers including *Napoleon, John Marshall, Sir William Blackstone, Hugo Grotius, Louis IX (St. Louis), King John, Charlemagne, Muhammad, and Justinian*. Figures symbolizing *Philosophy* (on the left) and *Liberty and Peace* (on the right).

- Symbolized on the back wall frieze is *Justice* with the winged female figure of *Divine Inspiration*, flanked by *Wisdom* and *Truth*. At the far left the *Powers of Good* are represented by *Security, Harmony, Peace, Charity, and Defense of Virtue*. At the far right the *Powers of Evil* are represented by *Corruption, Slander, Deceit, and Despotism*.

The main floor is largely occupied by the Justices’ Chambers, offices for law clerks and secretaries, the large, formal East and West Conference Rooms, the offices of the Marshal, an office for the Solicitor General, the Lawyers’ Lounge, and the private conference room and robing room of the Justices. This office space surrounds four courtyards, each with a central fountain.

Most of the second floor is devoted to office space including the offices of the Reporter of Decisions and the Legal Office. The Justices’ library reading room and the Justices’ dining room are also located here.

The library occupies the third floor and has a collection of more than 450,000 volumes. To meet the informational needs of the Court, librarians draw on electronic retrieval systems and their microform collection in addition to books. The library’s main reading room is paneled in hand carved oak. The wood carving here, as throughout the building, is the work of the Matthews Brothers.

The ground floor is devoted to offices and public services, including the offices of the Clerk of the Court, the offices of the Administrative Assistant to the Chief Justice, police headquarters, the Public Information Office and Press Room, the Curator’s Office and the Personnel Office. On this floor visitors can view one of the two marble spiral staircases. Each ascends five stories and is supported only by overlapping steps and by their extensions into the wall.

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